

My grandmother subscribed to a magazine called, The Good Ole Days. I once asked her if she longed for those “good ole days” and she said, “No”. When I asked her why she said, “I remember it taking me all day to do the wash. Now I just drop it in a machine and walk away and go and do other things. Why would I want to go back to it having to take all day to wash clothes?” Are the “good ole days” just a romantic illusion?

H. E. Fosdick, writing in 1920: “We can no more successfully serve him (God) with obsolete ecclesiastical machinery and methods long outgrown than we can carry on modern commerce with dugout canoes or clothe the world from family spinning wheels. We can no more heal the sick and feed the hungry by institutions appropriate to our grandfather’s tasks than we could use oxcarts for locomotives.” We, though, still cling to the romantic illusion of the past. The illusion of a better day, when everything seemed perfect, is only that, an illusion.

This month we will look at the beginning of the Church as recorded in the book of Acts. Here in its pages we discover the early Christians laying the foundation that will eventually change the world. Or, maybe we should say, hopefully change the world, if we can only get rid of the romantic illusion of the past and move on to new beginnings.

We begin first with the Psalmist. He writes that we are to “sing a new song.” I wondered why such a statement? He tells us. Look at what God has done or is doing. See how God has redeemed, restored and keeps promises made. Open your eyes to the world around and see God’s new mercies. God is moving in new and wonderful ways and the old songs are no longer adequate. God is moving forward not backward; it is time to sing new songs!

The followers of Christ are not sure what is to happen next. Their lives have been jolted by his death and resurrection. There have been post-resurrection appearances but what are they to do? They ask of him what they believe is an appropriate question: “When will you restore the Kingdom?” A question that could also be framed as: When will we be in power again? When will we have our own king? Our own nation? When will we get our identity back? Or—**When will we live again in the past?** They were thinking of an earthly kingdom – back to the “good ole days” of King David – when the land was theirs – a romantic illusion of all things good. They want freedom from Rome. They want to go back to the “good ole days” when things were perfect.

However, the past is not the answer. Jesus pushes them toward a new beginning. His answer moves the focus away from the past and into the future. You will be witnesses to the whole world. The new will be nothing like what you have known in the past. The new will transform the whole world. The new will not be bound by national or cultural barriers. The new will break down the walls that separate peoples. They will establish a new order, a new freedom that will only be found in Christ.

In other words, to paraphrase a phrase that has been in vogue recently: The glass ceiling has already been broken. We have just been slow in fully realizing it. Jesus brings empowerment and acceptance of all peoples. He brought in a new day for women although some in the church still do not want to accept it. The church was called to see all peoples as equals. Jesus shattered cultural norms in his relationships with women and Gentiles. However, we too have wanted to retreat into the past. We want to keep the structures the way they were, the way we are comfortable with. We like the old wine skins. We are not ready yet for new ones. It is not Jesus’ fault that we have not heard or are slow to hear his message. New beginnings are always hard.

Jesus responds to their question with the simple statement: they will be witnesses to the whole world. The image is of a faith that is expanding and moving toward new beginnings. It is one of moving forward, not one of retreating back to the past. The disciples were dealing with a limited vision of the Kingdom. Their eyes needed to be opened. They needed to be pushed forward into tomorrow. Their vision did not include an international mandate. Their vision was limited both geographically and theologically. Their vision was a romantic illusion of the past. This was not and is not the vision Christ has for the Church, His church.

Notice how Jesus widens their circle. Can you hear their responses?

Jerusalem? The city where they are now located. This is okay; this is where the Temple is. This is where we have a foundation.

Judea? This is okay, too. This is where we live. This is the land promised to Abraham and his descendants. We can live with this.

Samaria? Now wait. These people are our enemies. They are not like us. We have had disputes with them; they may be related but...

The ends of the earth? WHOA! This would include Gentiles. This would mean that we go outside our comfort zone. These people are not like us. They eat different foods, talk differently than we do. How can we include these in our circle? Suddenly their image of the past, of the kingdom of God is shattered – the glass ceiling is broken into billions of pieces and a whole new beginning is before them. Their world is turning upside down.

As they stand with their mouths open wide, gazing up into heaven they get further instructions: “stop gazing into heaven”. There is a world out there that needs to be challenged and changed. There are hearts that need to be transformed. There are lives that need to be redeemed. All gazing into heaven does is give you a stiff neck (whole other sermon here!). You will be empowered to change the world, to move in new directions with new beginnings. There are new songs to be sung. You will be Christ’s witnesses into the whole world and to do this a new song is needed. The romantic illusions of the past are just that, romantic illusions of the past. The challenge of faith is to move forward to new beginnings.

As we come again to this Table of our Lord we come to a Table that represents the past. The bread and cup remind us of the broken body and shed blood of Christ. We pause in remembrance of what was done, what was accomplished at Calvary. It is in the past that our redemption was secured. We pause and remember.

We also come to a Table that represents the present. We pause and give thanks today, in the now of the moment. We thank God for what we have received and for what God has done and is doing. It is this moment now that we again take the bread and cup.

And then, this is a Table of the future. We will not stay here; we will leave from this place and go out into the world. We do not stand gazing up into heaven, looking back toward the past—we go forward into a world in need of the message we have. A world constantly moving toward the future. A new song needs to be sung. A new beginning is possible. A new beginning for all peoples, period.

Fosdick, Henry Emerson, The Meaning of Service, International Committee of Young Men’s Christian Association, Association Press 1920, 1950 (p.155)